

# GORILLA WARFARE



**John Seale, Director of Photography on *Gorillas In The Mist*, tells of his experiences in the jungles of Central Africa. Bob Larkins reports**

"You have to goad a silverback a long way to get him to charge, that's his last resort. After that he does - eat you!"

John Seale, Oscar-nominated Australian cinematographer, was talking about his experiences in Central Africa working on *Gorillas In The Mist*, one of two hit movies of 1989 on which he was director of photography. The other was *Rain Man*, but that's another story, for another time.

Since the 'Renaissance' of Australian films in the early 1970s, locally-bred (if not always born) talent has become an integral part of the international movie scene. The most visible are the stars - Bryan Brown, Jack Thompson, Sigrid Thornton, Judy Davis, Mel Gibson, Sam Neill and the rest. But an equal number of talented Australians have made their presence felt just as strongly behind the camera - directors like Bruce Beresford, Peter Weir, Gillian Armstrong, Richard Franklin, Simon Wincer; composer Brian May; and cinematographers Russell Boyd and John Seale, to name a mere handful. John Seale was in Sydney early in June this year for the video launch of *Gorillas In The Mist* by Warner Home Video, and happy to chat about his experiences in Rwanda and Kenya while working on the film based on the life of Dian Fossey, the remarkable American woman who spent almost 20 years with gorillas, did a lot to save them from virtual extinction, and was eventually murdered for her efforts.

In *Gorillas In The Mist*, Dian Fossey is played by Sigourney Weaver, a role



which won her an Oscar nomination, and her co-star is another local boy, Bryan Brown, playing Bob Campbell, the 'National Geographic' photographer whose film of Fossey and the gorillas first brought her to world-wide attention. Bob Campbell was an adviser on the film, as was Ros Carr, played by Julie Harris. The scenes depicting Ros Carr's home were actually shot at her home, and of Sigourney Weaver's performance she said: "Sigourney is

perfect as Dian. She's really made herself into a second Dian. It's quite remarkable". "She was fabulous," said John Seale, of Sigourney. "I mean to go from New York and get stuck in amongst something that big - and believe me they are BIG - she was extraordinary." Sigourney managed to establish a rapport with the gorillas that is quite enchanting on the screen, and remarkable in view of the fact that she virtually had to do it on her own, without the aid of director Michael Apted.

John Seale explained that because of the strong protection of the gorillas, no more than five crew members were allowed into the area at any one time, and no artificial light could be used. Simon Trevor, a Kenyan wildlife photographer, went with Sigourney to

the habitat of the gorillas known as Group 5. "They were the only ones that were allowed to be touched, or to touch," said John. "Sigourney," he said, "put the film together. Because the director couldn't go in, she was literally directing herself, so it was a very, very ... not traumatic, but very hard work. She had to keep thinking of whatever the gorillas were doing, she had to fit it to a certain scene number. So when she came back she'd say 'We got a bit of this, and a bit of that' and it was all very exciting." While Sigourney and Simon Trevor were working with Group 5, John Seale, Michael Apted and the rest of the crew would be shooting more gorilla footage with other groups around the mountains in which Dian Fossey made her home. "You could go in among them, but you weren't allowed to touch them, so we'd go up and shoot those ones." And that was only the first step. The next was to match the footage of Sigourney and the gorillas with close-ups of her and of the gorillas created by

make-up genius Rick Baker, who served as Associate Producer on the film. In the film, it is impossible to tell the difference between Rick Baker's gorillas and the real thing.

Simon Trevor, the wildlife photographer, was instructed only to shoot wide shots of Sigourney and the apes in Rwanda. "In Kenya then we just had to do the close-ups to make that scene work," said John Seale, "and close-ups of the gorillas on a London sound stage. Everybody bounced off the first guy's stuff very well, it matched all the way through - so at any time you get three shots in a row, Rwanda, Kenya and London."

After six weeks in Rwanda, the entire crew moved to the Aberdare National Park, 700 miles away, in Kenya, where a reconstruction of Dian Fossey's campsite was built. The crew were not allowed to build roads or take helicopters into the Rwandan locations, but they could get trucks into Kenya, where a 'tent city' accommodated the crew of around 200 people.

The matching of the three different locations - Rwanda, Kenya and London - is superb, a tribute to the skills of John Seale and the rest of the crew, who were relieved to get back to civilisation in London after one of the toughest location shoots John Seale can remember - even though they all thrived on it. The problems included unpredictable weather, which John said "would change very quickly, it would be sunny one minute and freezing cold rain the next. It was always cold, this was 10,000 feet up". While shooting around the Karisoke Saddle in Rwanda, where Dian Fossey was based, the crew had to do a lot of walking. For one of the film's most remarkable shots, of a plane flying through the volcanic mountains, they spent half a day walking to the top of another volcano. The plane, a DC3 chartered by the film company, was in fact the same plane that took Dian Fossey into Rwanda 20 years earlier. And what about problems with the gorillas? Did John Seale ever feel afraid of them?: Oh I did, actually - one charged us one day and that was scary. They're very docile, they're extremely docile, they'll do anything to frighten you away, they'll tear down trees, they'll just grab trees and bark at you. But they don't like to touch you". Even so, a park ranger was bitten by a gorilla during filming. "He got caught between two fighting silverbacks and they just picked him up and bit him. They don't bite and tear, they just sort of go chomp and then open up and throw you. They threw this ranger about 40 feet!" John Seale's contribution to *Gorillas In The Mist* is evident in every frame, from the stunning panoramas of the looming volcanic mountains to the intimate firelit love scenes between Sigourney Weaver and Bryan Brown. With such distinguished credits as *Gorillas*, *Rain Man* and *Children Of A Lesser God* behind him, his is another talent of which we can all be proud, even if his name isn't up in lights with Mel, Bryan, Sigrid and the rest.

John Seale's next project is a film he will direct himself. If his work on *Gorillas* is any indication, it will be something worth waiting for.

- Bob Larkins.

